

CRESCENT CITY TRAIN DERAILMENT: JUNE 21, 1970

Shortly after 6:30 AM on Sunday, June 21, 1970, fifteen cars from a 108-car freight train on the Toledo, Peoria, and Western Railroad derailed in Crescent City, Illinois. The first five cars that went off the tracks contained stable freight, including sand and paper, but the other ten cars each carried about 34,000 gallons of propane. Several of the gas tanks exploded immediately after the derailment, erupting into flames that instantly engulfed part of the town and reached several hundred feet in the air.

Crescent City Fire Chief Orvel Carlson was awake at the time of the crash and felt the heat of the explosion from his home three blocks away. Carlson and the 20-man volunteer fire department responded quickly with their two pieces of fire fighting apparatus, but their efforts were impeded as the electricity that supplied the city water pumps had been knocked out of service by the crash. The firefighters instead obtained water from the city water tower and were successfully extinguishing the flames when, about one hour after the crash, a previously intact tank exploded. The blast threw part of the tank more than 600 feet and sent many of the nearest Crescent City firefighters to the hospital with burns and other injuries. By that point, however, more than 200 mutual aid responders from 35 communities were arriving in Crescent City, bringing dozens of pieces of fire fighting apparatus from as far as 40 miles away.

Throughout the morning, firefighters attacked the flames cautiously, wary of another tank explosion. This strategy proved to be a wise one because a second tank ruptured at 9:40 AM, launching a portion of the tank more than 1,600 feet. Five minutes later a third exploded, causing half of the tank to shoot through two houses and a cement-block garage before embedding itself in a third house. While the remaining tanks eventually ruptured and burned, none exploded as dramatically as the previous ones. On the advice of government officials, the unexploded tanks were allowed to continue burning until all the fuel was consumed. The final propane fire burned out on June 23, more than fifty-six hours after the derailment. More than 60 firefighters and civilians were injured during the ordeal, but there were no deaths.

A chemical engineer who investigated the derailment for the National Transportation Safety Board later reported that "responders were powerless" and that "something was amiss with the guidance offered these brave firefighters." Experts believed it had been terribly risky for the firefighters to attempt to extinguish the flames using traditional methods and stated that the city was fortunate that dozens of lives were not lost, as the area should have been completely evacuated. The reports on the Crescent City derailment helped the fire service recognize that incidents involving liquefied petroleum and other hazardous materials required special tactics and training. The fire profession soon initiated an earnest examination of these issues and began developing modern hazardous materials response methods.